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EXPOSITORY AND PRACTICAL STUDIES ON THE LIFE OF CHRIST

XLII. JESUS BEFORE PILATE

Luke 23:13-25¹

I. EXPOSITION

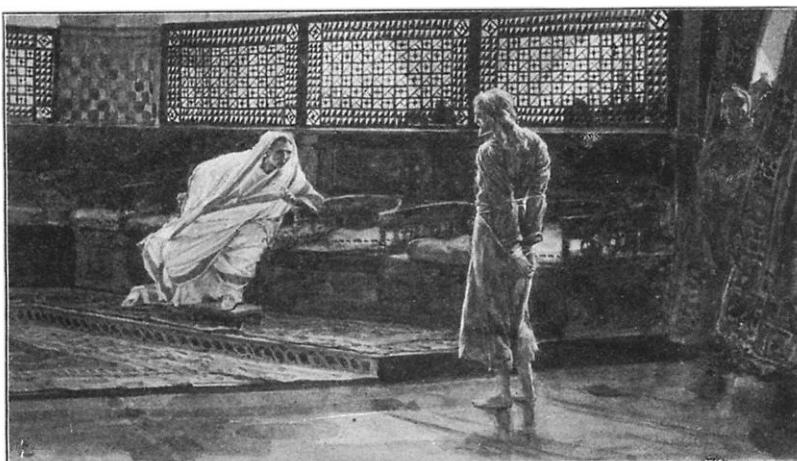
The Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, refused to indorse the sentence of death given against Jesus by the Sanhedrin (John 18:30, 31). The Jewish rulers had therefore to seek his conviction in the Roman court. The charge of "blasphemy" which would have no weight there was changed to *lese-majesté*—an attack on the sovereignty of the Roman state, the greatest crime possible in the eyes of the Roman law. When examined, Jesus declared that he was a king, but not in the sense charged. Pilate, convinced of the prisoner's innocence, announced his verdict of acquittal (Luke 23:4). The answering storm of protest caused Pilate to hesitate, to wait in indecision without releasing Jesus. Thus began his downward course of cowardice and failure. He was in a difficult dilemma. His past record was so bad that he did not dare offend the Jewish leaders. Yet he had either to do that or to execute an innocent man. He sought to rid himself of the whole difficulty by sending Jesus to Herod Antipas for judgment. 'Jesus' return greatly increased his difficulty. Pilate had shown his sensitiveness to pressure, was weaker to resist, and yet by Herod's confirmation of his judgment was under still greater obligation to free the prisoner. Vss. 14-16. Once more he emphatically declared Jesus to be innocent. But, instead of freeing him, he made a weak effort at compromise, hoping thereby to appease the enemies of Jesus and also to accomplish in the main the demands of Roman justice. The offer to scourge Jesus—i. e., to treat as a criminal one whom he had just declared innocent—was a fatal concession. It showed that he was ready to depart from principle under pressure.

Vss. 18-20. Confused by the increasing tumult, he took a desperate chance in the hope of extricating himself from his dilemma. To the mob just come to demand the pardon of a prisoner according to the annual custom, he offered the choice of Jesus or Barabbas. It was a base expedient. It miserably failed. By such an offer, however, he placed Jesus in the position of a condemned criminal. The course of events had passed beyond his control.

¹ International Sunday-School lesson for December 2, 1906.

Vss. 21-23. Weakly asserting Jesus' innocence for the third time, he called on the mob for some evidence that would justify him in yielding to their wishes. The end had come.

Vss. 24, 25. Of Pilate's pathetic attempt to shift to others the responsibility for Jesus' death, as well as the harrowing details of scourging and mockery (Matt. 27:24-30), Luke makes no mention. He only records the fact that, in answer to their persistent demands, Pilate gave the sentence of death. It should be carefully noted that this is not a sentence of condemnation resulting from the Roman trial, but a cowardly prostitution of authority on the part of Pilate in order to guard his own selfish



JESUS AND PILATE

interests. John's gospel states clearly the threat which finally overcame his reluctance and caused him to surrender to their demand (John 19:12).

II. SUGGESTIONS FOR SERMON: LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF PILATE

1. *The insufficiency of worldly character.*

a) His character was not founded on great principles. It was therefore shallow and lacking in courage. Pilate was at heart a coward. The good in him, unsupported by principle, succumbed at the crisis.

b) He was ruled by self-interest. He wronged his own conscience and executed an innocent man to save his selfish interests.

c) Expediency was his guide in action. He followed justice so long as not inconvenient. He was willing to compromise to retain favor.

2. *The coercive power of past sins.*

a) Pilate's past career was full of cruelty and maladministration. He knew it would not bear investigation.

b) The fear of exposure and punishment now paralyzed his good intentions. He had put a power in the hands of wicked men by which they could control him.

3. The folly of temporizing.

a) Hesitation to do known duty gives time for temptation, weakens power to act, and encourages opposition.

b) Desire to gain favor, to please at any cost, will end in sacrifice of principle, in following the dictates of the mob.

c) To become a tool of popular will does not free from guilt of wrong-doing or of shirked responsibility. Public men may not wash their hands of wrong caused by their own criminal failure.

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XLIII. JESUS ON THE CROSS

Luke 23:33-46²

I. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Vs. 34 is rejected by the best editors as not belonging to the original text. "Few verses of the gospels bear in themselves a surer witness to the truth of what they record than this first of the words from the cross; but it need not therefore have belonged originally to the book in which it is now included. We cannot doubt that it comes from an extraneous source. Nevertheless, like 22:43 f., Matt. 16:2 f., it has exceptional claims to be permanently retained, with the necessary safeguards, in its accustomed place" (Westcott and Hort).

II. EXPOSITION

The place called Golgotha, which Luke translates "a skull," has been most zealously sought, but defies identification. It was perhaps the usual place of execution. The execution of the two criminals had perhaps been set for that day, and that of Jesus was, for convenience, combined with theirs. His death was thus to have every element, not only of agony, but of ignominy and disgrace. In the not unusual parting of the garments among the soldiers who carried out the sentence, Luke, like Mark before him, finds resemblance to the picture of utter distress and shame presented in Ps. 22. This resemblance points all that Luke records of the crucifixion in this first paragraph. The malefactors on either side, the distri-

² International Sunday-School Lesson for December 9, 1906.

bution of the garments, the curious gazing crowd, the mocking rulers and soldiers with their taunts of former claims and present weakness—all have their counterparts in that psalm, the opening cry of which was among the last words upon the lips of Jesus. The rulers, who had brought him to his death, taunted him with his messianic claims; the soldiers, with the political aspirations with which his messianic claims were vulgarly confused. The placard above his head, giving a title long obsolete, which it was now treasonable to claim, was rather a part of this general mockery than a genuine statement of his offense. Even the offering of vinegar, which Mark ascribes to compassion, is interpreted by Luke as derisive.

The account of the penitent malefactor is peculiar to the third gospel. Rebuking his fellow's brutal hardness even in the face of death, and to a man dying like themselves, he acknowledges his own guilt and asserts the innocence of Jesus, to whom he appeals as the Messiah destined one day to return and establish his kingdom. In that day he would have Jesus remember him, doubtless by raising him up to share in that blessed era. Jesus accepts his repentance, and rewards his faith with the promise of immediate fellowship with him in paradise—the abode, in Jewish thought, of the pious dead.

The unnatural and stupendous darkness of that afternoon and the mysterious tearing-asunder of the temple veil which screened the most holy place are recorded by Luke without comment, but in a connection full of significance. The rending of the veil especially suggests a favorite idea of the writer to the Hebrews (Heb., chaps. 9, 10). Both matters appealed strongly to the Christian imagination as significant attendants of the unutterable tragedy.

Jesus' last words, as Luke records them, were a sentence from Ps. 31:6. The word "Father" suggests his undisturbed trust and fellowship with God, in this hour of extremity. Of his dying agonies the evangelist says only that he uttered a loud cry before repeating those words. Death came only after long and fearful anguish, yet much earlier than was usual with crucified persons, who ordinarily lived twelve hours and sometimes lingered for days, writhing in fever and delirium. Doubtless anguish of spirit before and during his crucifixion hastened the death of Jesus, which probably fell late in the afternoon.

III. SUGGESTED SERMON: JESUS' ATTITUDE TOWARD SUFFERING

While Jesus was keenly sensitive to suffering—for he was no Stoic—he did not shun the suffering of others or himself seek exemption from it.

On the other hand, he anticipated it, and prepared for it seeking help from God in agonizing prayer.

From this preparation resulted his serenity of spirit in the worst of it.

His triumph over it is a pattern and inspiration for us in a world of suffering, for which we may prepare ourselves through lives of prayerful dependence upon God, and over which we may triumph as he did.

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XLIV. JESUS RISEN FROM THE DEAD

Matt. 28: 1-15³

I. CRITICAL COMMENTS

The accounts in the four gospels of what took place on Easter morning differ widely among themselves, both as respects general substance of narrative and as respects details. The simplest account is that in Mark 16:1-8. According to it the women early Sunday morning, coming to the tomb with splices for embalming, find the tomb open, and entering it behold a young man in a white robe, saying: "Jesus has risen and will meet his disciples in Galilee." Since this account is evidently incomplete, and since vss. 9-20 are shown by combination of internal and external evidence to form no part of the original Gospel of Mark, but to be an addition of a later hand summarized from the other gospels, we are obliged to suppose that the original conclusion evidently required by vs. 7 was lost by some very early accident, and its place filled later by vss. 9-20.

To this brief account in Mark the Gospel of Matthew adds certain features which are peculiar to it, in part probably derived from the original conclusion in Mark,⁴ in part through other sources. Of the former character is probably the appearance of Jesus to the returning women (vss. 9, 10). That Jesus had announced that he would meet his disciples in Galilee does not exclude his appearance to the women in Jerusalem. The narrative of the soldiers set to guard the tomb, and afterward consenting for money to admit that they had committed the deadly offense of sleeping while on guard, no doubt preserves a story which was current among the early Christians to counteract and explain the Jewish assertion that the disciples had stolen the body. The story of the "great earthquake," the descent of the "angel of the Lord," rolling away the stone and causing the watchers to "quake and become as dead men," evidently represents the attempt of the church to picture what took place before the women reached the tomb, and belongs rather in the realm of reverent imagination

³ International Sunday-School Lesson for December 16, 1906.

⁴ Cf. *American Journal of Theology*, 1905, pp. 484 ff., and *Biblical World*, September, 1905, p. 230.

than in that of witnessed fact, the New Testament itself indicating that there were no witnesses of these things.

There is nothing in this original account of Mark, vss. 1-8, or in that which was probably contained in the original conclusion of Mark, which is inherently improbable. Such experiences are not uncommon and have a recognized place among psychological phenomena. They are variously explained. According to the view held by many scientific biblical scholars, this and the other resurrection phenomena were produced by the surviving personality of Jesus projecting itself into the minds of the disciples and causing them to see visions and hear voices. Such a view of the resurrection of Jesus, as a real and spiritual event, but unattended by any reanimation of his body, is, on the whole, the most acceptable in the present state of scientific thought, if not also most consistent with the earliest New Testament evidence itself. The chief difficulty with it is the question: What became of the body of Jesus? The attempt to derive from the different gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances a connected and self-consistent story has never been wholly successful. We must for the present rest content with the judgment that at the basis of these narratives there were real experiences of the disciples of Jesus, through which their faith in him being revived and strengthened, they entered into a spiritual fellowship with Jesus which became the moral dynamic of their lives. That their interpretations of the cause of these experiences are not wholly consistent, and that around the record of such extraordinary experiences there are gathered some elements that are historically improbable, is not at all surprising.

II. EXPOSITORY COMMENT

Critical discussions like those above should be opened only with classes which are ready for them, but when opened at all should be dealt with without reserve. There is, however, another point of view from which to approach a lesson like this; and that is, putting questions of fact and history entirely to one side, to study the moral and literary beauty of the passage just as it lies before us. For this purpose it needs no explanation. The time is the early morning of Sunday, just before sunrise has terminated the sabbath. The two women, agitated with doubts and fears, make their way to the sepulcher. In place of the stillness of a deserted tomb, which the other accounts suggest, there is a sudden and marvelous manifestation, an earthquake, an angel descending from the sky, rolling away the stone and seating himself upon it, and then speaking to the astonished women the beautiful words of the resurrection evangel. On their way in haste to carry the word to the disciples, Jesus himself meets

them with words of greeting. They fall at his feet in adoration, and hear from his own lips the message to the disciples. Then the scene shifts from the sunlight of Easter joy to the dark lurking-places where priests and soldiers make their nefarious bargains. The dramatic contrasts are admirably represented in Gounod's oratorio, *The Redemption*.

III. APPLICATION TO LIFE

Theme: "The Christian's victory over death and the grave." Text: "He is not here for he is risen;" or, "Why seek ye the living among the dead?" Using Jesus as an example, show that a spiritual personality never even enters the tomb, that it is only the cast-off shell which is or can be buried. Do battle with the dismal and pagan thoughts of death which are associated with corpses and cemeteries, and maintain that the spiritual view of the resurrection of Jesus suggested above opens the way for a view of death itself far more consonant with our higher thoughts and feelings.

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XLV. JESUS ASCENDS TO HEAVEN

Luke 24:36-53^s

I. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

This section contains material not found elsewhere in the New Testament, although there is an echo of it in the appendix to Mark (16:14). It evidently belongs to that material which the third gospel derived from sources not otherwise preserved. The paragraphs 36-43 have a certain affinity with John 20:19-25. In both passages the material, physical body of the risen Jesus is distinctly emphasized. The relation between such a statement as Luke 24:39 and I Cor. 15:50 is very difficult to determine. Another difficulty is involved in a comparison of the entire section with John 20:19, where the non-fleshly character of the body of Jesus seems implied. The section Luke 24:44-53 is not found in any of the other gospels, and belongs to the Lucan cycle which appears also in the first chapter of Acts (1:1-14).

II. EXPOSITION

Vs. 36, "stood in the midst of them": The implication is of a sudden miraculous appearance similar to that in John 20:19. Vs. 37, "spirit": that is, disembodied spirit, though in the form of the body of Jesus. Vs. 39: "A spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye behold me having." The omission of blood implies the death of Jesus. "Handle me": i. e., gain by actual touch a conviction of my substantiality. Cf. also vs. 40. Vss. 41, 42: The fact that Jesus ate a piece of fish would be a still further

^s International Sunday-School Lesson for December 23, 1906.

evidence that he possessed a material body. The difficulty of harmonizing this statement with the other facts we know of the risen body of Jesus is apparent, and can be solved only by some hypothesis such as (*a*) that during the forty days the body of Jesus was in process of transformation; (*b*) that the eating and drinking on the part of the risen Jesus was itself a miracle; or (*c*) that the entire account belongs to a late stratum of gospel material and embodies the results of the reworking of original material for the sake of emphasizing the reality and identity of the risen Jesus. Vs. 44, "These are my words," etc., implies some extended conversation between Jesus and his disciples which is not given in the Gospel of Luke. The probable reference is to the prophecy of his resurrection made by Jesus during his lifetime. The words contain in brief form the argument for the messiahship of Jesus which the early church drew from his resurrection as a fulfilling of prophecy. The threefold division is that of the Hebrew Bible. Vss. 47-49: cf. Acts 1:8. Vs. 49, "promise of my Father": i. e., the promise of the Holy Spirit. The early church commonly regarded the coming of the Holy Spirit as the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel 2:28 f.; Isa. 44:1. Vs. 50. "Over against Bethany": that is, about an hour's walk from Jerusalem. Vs. 51: Reference here is to the ascension described more in detail in the section Acts 1:1-14. The verse certainly cannot refer to the ending of one of the various appearances of Jesus to his disciples prior to his final disappearance. Vs. 22, "with great joy": They now believed that their Master had ascended to the post of messianic authority and dignity in heaven, whence he would presently return to complete his messianic work on earth.

III. SUGGESTION FOR SERMON: THE RESURRECTION AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

1. The resurrection of Jesus was not a mere vision on the part of the disciples. It was objectively real. The fact that his personality continued after death in some discernible form is thus both an encouragement and an argument for our faith in personal immortality and in our resurrection (vss. 36-43).
2. The resurrection of Jesus is the consummation of the revelation of an eternal divine purpose to save a world from sin and death (vss. 44-48).
3. The divine authority of Jesus in the spiritual realm, as implied in the description of the ascension, should be a source of inspiration and joy to every believer (vss. 50-53).
4. To believe in the living, risen Christ is to surrender to his leadership, and consequently to come into personal and regenerating communion with God (vs. 49).

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